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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOL. XXX.

BALTIMORE, MARCH, 1915.

No. 3.

THE COMPLETENESS OF CHAUCER'S *HOUS OF FAME*

Most students of Chaucer doubtless feel with Professor Manly¹ that forty years of strenuous activity on the part of scholars should certainly not have left unsolved the meaning of the poet's seemingly most personal work, the *Hous of Fame*. They also assuredly have an *a priori* satisfaction in Professor Manly's tempting simple solution of this vexing problem in Chaucer scholarship. For, those of us who are not unalterably wedded to the "autobiography" theory have long felt—as did M. Dupin toward the mystery of "The Purloined Letter"—that the solution of the meaning of the *Hous of Fame* is probably "too plain," a "little too self-evident," and that the meaning of the poem is to be discerned, if at all, not by our reading between the lines, but by our interpreting simply and literally the lines themselves. It could hardly be expected, however, that we medievalists, five centuries late, should be in entire accord even on the literal meaning of the lines. To be specific, I find no evidence either in the poem itself or in the probabilities of the case, that the work "was intended to herald or announce a group of love stories and to serve as a sort of prologue to them."² On the contrary, I believe that the poem is, save the necessarily brief missing conclusion which it seems to demand, absolutely complete in itself and that it has no other meaning or purpose than that which is more than once definitely expressed in the words of the eagle and of Chaucer himself.

For the sake of having a clear understanding of the situation as Chaucer presents it to us, I ask the reader to follow with me the significant lines in the poem referring to the purpose of the journey which the poet is making and the nature of the reward which will meet him at the end.

¹ "What Is Chaucer's *Hous of Fame*?" *Kittredge Anniversary Papers*, p. 73.

² Manly, p. 81.

In Book II, 70, 71, the eagle tells Chaucer—

this case that betid thee is,
Is for thy lore and thy prow,

Jupiter pities you, continues the eagle, because you have so long served Cupid and Venus and have made books, songs, and ditties in honor of Love; and he considers it a virtue that you make your head ache many a night in writing about love. Furthermore, he considers (ll. 136-143):

that thou hast no tydinges
Of Loves folk, if they be glade,
Ne of nothing elles that God made;
And noght only fro fer contree,
That there no tyding cometh to thee,
But of thy verray neighebores
That dwellen almost at thy dores,
Thou herest neither that ne this;
.
And therefor Joves, through his grace,
Wol that I bere thee to a place,
Which that hight the Hous of Fame
To do thee some disport and game, (153-156)
.
For truste wel that thou shalt here
.
Of Loves folke mo tydynges,
Bothe sothe sawes and lesynges;
.
Mo discords, and mo jelousyes,
Mo murmurs, and mo novelryes,
And mo dissymulaciouns,
And feigned reparaciouns; (164-180)

In 517-521, the eagle speaks of

the grete soun,
that rumbleth up and down
In Fames Hous, ful of tydynges,
Bothe of fair speche and chidynges,
And of fals and soth compound.

And in 579-586, the eagle exclaims,

And God of hevene sende thee grace,
Som good to lernen in this place,

In the third book, 794-799 and 866-886, Chaucer tells his friend why he has come to the *Hous of Fame*, and then refers to the nature of the tidings in this house:

That wol I tellen thee,
The cause why I stonde here.
Som newe tydynges for to lere,
Som newe thynges, I not what,
Tydynges other this or that,
Of love, or swich thinges glade.

Ne never reste is in that place,
That hit nys fild ful of tydynges,
Other loude, or in whisprynges.
And over all the houses angles,
Is ful of rounynges and of jangles,
Of werres, of pees, of mariages,
Of reste, of labour of viages,

In 917-936, the eagle resumes his address to the poet:

But sith that Joves, of his grace,
As I have seyde, wol thee solace
Finally with thise thynges,
Unkouth syghtes and tydynges,
To passe with thyn hevynesse,
Swiche routhe hath he of thy distresse,—
That thou suffrest debonairly,
And wost thyselfen utterly,
Desperat of all maner blis,
Sith that Fortune hath mad a-mys
The swote of al thyn hertes reste
Languishe and eek in point to breste,—
That he through his myghty merite,
Wol do thee an ese, al be hit lyte,
And yaf expresse commaundement,
To which I am obedient,
To furthre thee with al my might,
And wysse and teche thee aright,
Wher thou maist most tydynges here;
Thou shalt anon heer many oon here.

And in 1041-1054, Chaucer relates the story of his experience in the house of tidings:

And as I alther-fastest wente
Aboute, and dide al myn entente,
Me for to playe and for to lere,
And eek a tydyng for to here,
That I hadde herd of som contree
That shall not now be told for me;
For hit no need is, redely;
Folk can synge hit bet than I.
For al mot out, other late or rathe,
Alle the sheves in the lathe.
I herde a grete noise withalle
In a corner of the halle,
Ther men of love tydynges tolde,
And I gan thiderwarde beholde:

If we disregard, for the moment, the probabilities in the case, and limit our immediate consideration to the actual meaning of the lines themselves, we shall find that the poet gives us an explicit account of the purpose of his journey. As a reward for his labors in the service of Love, Jupiter has made it possible for him to throw off for a brief period the burden of authorship, and, carefree, to see and hear many wonderful things on his journey through the air to the house of Fame, and particularly to observe intimately the varied experiences of "Loves folk," whom (we must infer) he has hitherto known about only through his books. The tidings which he hears are not stories or tales such as Chaucer would have in mind if he had used the word "tydyngs" as a synonym for "stories." These tidings constitute what I may call the flotsam and jetsam of the daily life of lovers. They are the current news of the servants of Love. I find in the foregoing lines no support for the argument that the author is referring to anything so formal or articulate or unified as "love stories." Furthermore, even if we grant that Chaucer uses "tydynges" in the sense of stories, we have no positive evidence in the lines themselves implying that the poet will *tell* these stories which he hears in Fame's house. In Chaucer's account of the tidings of the house of Fame, there is no stronger implication that he will tell these stories than there is in the *Troilus* where Pandarus speaks of the story which a maiden was reading to Criseyde and her ladies (*Troilus*, II, 81-84):

And fond two other ladies sete and she
Within a paved parlour; and they three
Herden a mayden reden hem the geste
Of al the sege of Thebes, while hem leste.

If we may now consider in the light of probabilities the passages in the poem which, as I have said before, seem to be most significant, we shall find little confirmatory proof for the theory that Chaucer hears love stories (in the House of Fame) which he is afterwards to tell to others. The probabilities I shall ask to be considered under two main heads: (1) the

nature of the tidings; and (2) the use which the poet is to make of them.

(1) If Chaucer meant to use *tydyngs* in the sense of stories, is it not strange that he was so careful not to use the synonyms "stories" or "tales" at one or more of the many places where we find the word "*tydyngs*"?³ If he had had in mind love stories, the kind of stories that he might tell, would he not have used the word "story" or "tale," as he does in so many other poems? The kind of story which Chaucer was interested in at the time of the composition of the *Hous of Fame* (whether in 1379 or 1384) was the story which he found in his books, such a story as that of Dido and Eneas, which he tells at length in this very poem, or such a story as he refers to in the following lines:

This olde storie, in Latin which I fynde,
Of queene Anelyda and false Arcite.

Therefore, if we interpret the word "*tydyngs*" as stories, we must assume that these tidings which come up to Fame's house are book stories, an extremely unlikely possibility.

These tidings of love's folk are the happenings of the day, interesting bits of gossip,⁴ scraps of information—just such things as Chaucer, the comptroller by day and the poet by night, would have no means of knowing; not love stories, for these he had in his books. There would be no need for Chaucer to take this journey for the sake of hearing new love stories. He doubtless had plenty of them already lying in his chest. What he desired was chatty news and strange sights; and such "*uncouth sightes and tydynges*" he found at the end of his journey.

(2) As to the use which Chaucer intended to make of the tidings, the assumption that these tidings which the poet mentions so often

in his poem are not love stories will be strengthened if we can show that Chaucer did not intend to use this material for a series of stories,⁵ or, in other words, that the purpose of the journey, which is the purpose of the poem, is not to provide Chaucer with new poetic material. The purpose and nature of the reward, as stated in the poem, do not suggest a group of love stories to follow. Is it possible that Chaucer is to be rewarded for his writing of love stories, and to be relieved of his great distress by being taken to a place where he shall find material for another batch of love stories? An opportunity for further labor in writing love stories seems to me to be a strange sort of solace for the poet, who, as the poem suggests, needs a rest from such labor. Should not this journey to the house of Fame be considered rather as a delightful, unusual experience which Jupiter wishes to grant to the poet for his long service to Cupid and Venus? As we learn from the poem, the poet has lived the life of a recluse. Here is an opportunity for him to hear and see strange things. And the pleasure which Chaucer takes in this journey, and in the wonderful things which he experiences on the way and at the end, justifies completely the purpose of this reward from the great ruler of the universe (Book II, 153-156):

And therfor Joves, through his grace,
Wol that I bere thee to a place,
Which that hight the Hous of Fame,
To do thee som disport and game,

As the last and best part of the poet's experiences, come the sights and sounds of the house of tidings, the legitimate goal of his journey and the logical end of the poem.⁶ The purpose of the journey and the complete reward

³ For Chaucer's use of the word "*tydyngs*" or "*tydyng*" in other poems, see *Troilus*, II, 951, 1113; *Tale of the Man of Lawe*, 726, 727; *Prologue of Man of Lawe's Tale*, 129; *The Clerk's Tale*, 752.

⁴ Other things agreeing, one of these tidings may have been the rumor of the wedding of Richard and Anne, a tiding from a far country.

⁵ The possibility of a single story to conclude the *Hous of Fame*, I do not consider, as Professor Manly has already shown the unlikelihood of such a plan.

⁶ Only on the assumption that the *Hous of Fame* is a prologue to something else, can the house of tidings be regarded as a decorative element. On other grounds, the whirling house must be looked at as constituting an essential part of the poet's experiences on his journey.

are satisfied in the experiences which the poet has on the way and at the end.

Additional evidence against the theory that the poem suggests a group of love stories to follow is the unified nature of the poem itself. Chaucer's logical division of the material into three books, together constituting a unified whole, indicates to my mind that the poet conceived of the poem as a thing complete in itself. It is consistent throughout. Looked at as a love-vision journey poem, a poem in which the hero is to hear and see wonderful things, as a reward for certain services, it is, with the exception of the brief missing part of the third book, as complete a poem as Chaucer's own *Parlement of Foules* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In the *Parlement*, African says to the poet (109-112),

. . . 'Thou hast thee so wel born
In loking of myn olde book to-torn,
Of which Macrobie roghte not a lyte,
That somdel of thy labour wolde I quyte,'

Chaucer is rewarded for his labor by this journey to the court of the Goddess Nature. In the *Inferno*, I, 82-84, Dante addresses Virgil thus:

O degli altri poeti onore e lume,
Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore,
Che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

And Virgil replies, I, 112-114:

Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno,
Che tu mi segui, ed io sarò tua guida,
E trarrotti di qui per loco eterno,

Through the aid of his master, Virgil, Dante is enabled to take this journey through the doleful place to the gate of St. Peter. Similarly, through the grace of Jupiter, Chaucer, the recluse, is enabled, like Dante, to experience things strange and wonderful. In each case, the poet is interested not only in the ultimate goal of his journey, but also in the marvelous things that he sees by the way. The *Hous of Fame* shows consistency of plan and

execution. For a medieval love-vision, it is reasonably well proportioned. Chaucer's recital of the love story of Dido and Eneas, I admit, may be a trifle drawn out; but the discourse on sound and the journey through the air, the description of the outer walls and the great hall of the castle and the ice-cap, the picture of the goddess and the throngs of suppliants, the explanation of the turning house of tidings, are features which one might naturally expect to find in a poem of this sort. In all of these things, as parts of his unusual experiences, Chaucer is thoroughly interested. And so far as we can see, the poem exists for the sake of these wonderful experiences, culminating in the house of tidings, and not for the sake of a story or of stories to follow. Regarded as a prologue to a group of love stories, it becomes the only inartistic poem which Chaucer ever wrote. As a means to an end, it is inconceivable.

The simple explanation which I have just given for the meaning of the *Hous of Fame* has at least one merit—it takes the poem at its obvious face value. The burden of proof rests on those who consider it as an allegory with autobiographical significance, or as a prologue to a story or group of stories. Until stronger evidence shall appear to support such contentions, I shall be satisfied to regard it as a love-vision poem, in which the poet realizes to the fullest extent the possibilities of the device of a journey as a reward for his services in the cause of Love. Employing such rich poetic material as the combined classical conception of the goddess Fama and the abstract idea of worldly reputation, the journey of the "grete poete of Itaille" through the lower world and to the abode of the blessed, and the conventional device of the love-vision, Chaucer has given us the *Hous of Fame*, a complete poem, rich in thought and fancy, in story and significance—a poem in which are shown at their very best the poet's fertility of invention and skill of artistic presentation.

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